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## On The Mark: Land planning at the voting booth

By Mark Strain

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There is a new challenge to development in Florida that may put the power to make decisions on growth squarely in the hands of the public through an amendment to the Florida Constitution. Called the Florida's Hometown Democracy Amendment, it would require all changes to any comprehensive plan to be approved by a voter referendum. The informational website is: [www.floridahometowndemocracy.com](http://www.floridahometowndemocracy.com).

The website is loaded with information and links that have addressed many of the questions voters have about the impact of such an amendment. There is also a downloadable petition form for registered voters to fill out and send in if they want to see this option become added to a future ballot.

Changes to our local comprehensive plan usually occur twice a year in the form of Growth Management Plan (GMP) changes. For any zoning in this county to become reality, the very first step in the process is that the zoning request must be consistent with our GMP. Once that consistency is acknowledged, then developers can go to the next step and actually apply for the particulars of their zoning request, usually in the form of a Planned Unit Development (PUD). Some local land use attorneys have even suggested that once a project is consistent with the GMP, approval is mandatory. Regardless of whether this is right or wrong, the importance given to the GMP is obvious.

Public involvement prior to 2005 in GMP amendments was nearly non-existent because the process of public notification was nearly non-existent. GMP amendments had been done for years in the stealth mode, which was a huge advantage to the profit margins of land owners wanting to cash-in on rezones.

In 2005, our Board of County Commissioners wisely approved changes that now require any applicants for GMP amendments to notify the immediate

neighborhoods adjacent to where the amendment is occurring. While this revised notification process is better, it still has a long way to go to be informative enough to truly let folks know what is going on.

The Florida Hometown Democracy Amendment takes public notification to the highest form and puts actual approval of any of these changes in the hands of the voters, literally on the ballot.

Guess what? The development industry and the related groups that profit from more development are, as expected, against this amendment. There are a myriad of concerns formed by opposition to this amendment and many are carefully explained and answered at the website of Florida Hometown Democracy. The money that will be poured into opposing this amendment will be enormous. Comprehensive plan changes are the backbone to zoning and worth billions of dollars to some property owners. With that much at stake, we can be assured there will be a lot of confusing and misleading marketing on this issue.

Discussion is healthy and putting all the facts on the table to be sorted out by the voters is simply democracy in action. Should this amendment reach our voting booths, then we can be certain that the heavily funded opposition will provide a lot of data for conscientious voters to consider. This is not bad. Ironically, the same voters who decide whether or not this amendment passes, will then determine the allowable changes to their neighborhoods by voting on planning changes.

One of the strongest criticisms of this amendment is the fact that every voter can weigh in on complicated land planning changes and that by doing so, we are taking complex issues and putting them in the hands of inexperienced decision makers.

But aren't all of our elected officials inexperienced when they first get elected to office? Yet they immediately enter into voting on these and other similar decisions that they may have never encountered before. Elected officials have staff to provide summaries as a guideline for every issue they vote on, but the voters in any planning ballot will have a myriad of analysis provided by both sides of every issue coming forward from which they can assess the value of each proposed change as well.

Unless there is a valid reason why the application of democracy does not work, this amendment will carry a lot of weight with citizens who vote.

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